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ABSTRACT

To test effects of family constellation on children's acquisition of sex-role, the sex-role behavior of 175 children between the ages of 3 and one half and 6 years from one-child and two-child families was compared. Included in the design were five categories: only children, and four additional categories based on sex and relative age of siblings (i.e., male or female, older, younger). Measures were obtained on gender constancy, toy and activity preference, personality attributes, preferences for stereotyped versus non-stereotyped activities in others and perceptions of friend's and sibling's likely choices of toys and activities. Results indicate that the presence of siblings in the family is not an essential condition for learning the gender curriculum. Gender itself is probably more important in determining sex-role content and orientation than are family constellation variables. Family constellation was not related to acquisition of gender constancy. Particularly for girls, sibling status was related to both knowledge about cultural stereotypes and sex-role flexibility. Only children (particularly girls) were generally more knowledgeable about various kinds of stereotypic information. Despite this, girls were less traditional in their preferences and more androgynous in their self-descriptions than were other groups. Female only children were the most extreme in terms of flexibility of gender roles. (Author/RH)

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GENDER CONSTANCY AND SIBLING STATUS

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The research I am going to talk about today is part of a larger study investigating sex role content and orientation as a function of sibling status. Although siblings have been mentioned by some investigators as a source of sex-role information and influence (e.g., Sutton-Smith), the overwhelming theoretical emphasis in this area has been on the parents as gender-role socializers particularly for young children. More recently, it has been suggested that multiple agents may play a role in the acquisition process including friends, the media, the schools, and siblings. Of these non-parental agents, it may be the case that siblings (particularly older ones) are second in importance to parents during the preschool period.

To date, no one has specifically looked at the presence or absence of siblings as a variable which can potentially affect a child's gender-role acquisition. In the present study we have compared various components of sex-role behavior of children from a one-child family with those from a two-child family. Within the latter constellation we looked at those with younger or older siblings who were either the same- or opposite-sex from the target child. There are a number of factors along which these kinds of families should differ that may affect gender roles. The most obvious is simply the presence of siblings which affects the intellectual, social, and physical atmosphere of the household. In this last regard, for example, an opposite-sex sibling in the house means that a different set of toys is probably present and somewhat available. A second important difference between the one-child and two-child families, however, may lie in differential parental pre-child attitudes and post-child socialization behavior. Parents who voluntarily elect to have only one child are part of a very small, but growing minority. They are clearly going against the prevailing beliefs held by the majority. It has been repeatedly demonstrated that negative attitudes

persist towards the one-child family despite trends towards having fewer children. Stereotypes of only children being spoiled, maladjusted, and unhappy are widely held even though empirical research has not supported these beliefs and, in fact, has demonstrated many positive attributes associated with only child status (e.g., intelligence, achievement, etc.).

There are a number of diverse reasons why parents choose to have only one child. These include financial necessity, career aspirations, and marital difficulties. One which has not been looked at may be that parents of only children may have less of a need for gender diversity. When a decision is made to have one child, obviously, the possibility of having both a son and a daughter is given up. Our expectation was that this would have subsequent effects on the only child's sex-role socialization.

There are three components of sex roles which might be affected by family constellation variables. The first has to do with the child's cognitive readiness to deal with gender information and concepts. One way in which we operationally tapped the cognitive aspects was with the gender constancy measure. The ability to recognize that one's gender category is immutable in the face of changing superficial cues is a cognitive milestone which affects subsequent sex-role behavior. The second component is partially cognitive and involves the learning of gender concepts. Information about the appropriateness or inappropriateness of various behaviors for boys and girls is part of this learning. Learning of this normative information about sex-role stereotypes is partially contingent on the child's developmental level but is also affected by the degree of sex-typing (or lack of it) in the child's environment. The extent to which the child had attained knowledge about stereotypes represented our measure of this aspect of sex-role acquisition. A third component of sex roles has to do with the child's actual preferences in a variety of sex role domains.

The question can be raised as to how closely these preferences conform to sex-typed norms. How traditional or flexible is a child's behavior in this area? One can, of course, know about normative expectations while choosing to ignore them. To assess this, we looked at the strength of children's preferences for toys and activities

associated with the same sex, those associated with the opposite sex, and those which were not perceived as sex-typed. Additionally, we looked at how the child described him or herself in terms of gender-associated adjectives.

There were two major expectations. The first was that only children would be more cognitively advanced in the sex role area than their counterparts with siblings. The second was that only children would be less traditional and more flexible than those with a brother or a sister.

The reasoning underlying the first expectation is based upon the confluence model presented by Zajonc and Marcus. Most of you are probably aware of the model, but briefly, it suggests that a new-born entering an all-adult environment will be intellectually superior to those entering a social environment containing a lot of young children. The presence of children, in effect, dilutes the total intellectual atmosphere. Thus, we anticipated that both gender constancy and knowledge of stereotypes would be more advanced in only children.

The rationale underlying the second expectation derives from the fact that parents of only children who have given up the possibility of having both a boy and a girl would encourage gender-role diversity in their child. Since the only child might be expected to satisfy whatever needs the parents had for both a son and a daughter, they should exhibit both "feminine" and "masculine" behavior irrespective of their gender. Carrying this argument a bit further, it was also expected (for similar reasons) that in completed two-child families (i.e., where a third child was not desired), children with a same-sex sibling should be more flexible than those with an opposite-sex sibling, particularly when the sibling was older.

To assess these expectations, we used 175 children between the ages of 3½ and 6. There were five sibling categories in the design: only children, first-born children (of two) with a same-sex younger sibling, first-borns with an opposite-sex younger sibling, second-borns (of two) with a same-sex older sibling, and second-borns with an opposite-sex older sibling. Children were drawn from 14 different schools in the

Boulder-Denver geographical area. The families were relatively heterogeneous with regard to socioeconomic status ranging from upper-lower to upper-middle SES, although they were homogeneous with regard to race and ethnicity (i.e., white, non-Hispanic). By design, the preponderance of children came from two-parent families. Two-child families where siblings were more than three years apart in age were not included. The parents were also interviewed, although that data is still undergoing analysis and is unfortunately not yet available for presentation.

Children were assessed in two separate sessions. The instruments used included the following: the gender constancy scale (used by Slaby & Frey), a toy and activity preference scale, the children's version of the Spence-Helmreich Personality Attributes Scale, and preferences for stereotyped vs. non-stereotyped activities in others. In addition, knowledge about stereotypes with regard to toys, activities, and personality traits were also assessed. In an attempt to ascertain the child's perception of his or her social environment, questions were also asked about what they thought the choices of their best friend and siblings (where relevant) would be with regard to the same list of toys and activities and which they thought their parents would select for them.

The particular items used had been previously scaled by grade school children with regard to who they thought usually played with them. The items within each category ranged from moderately to highly sex-typed. The masculine toy category included items such as: airplane, model boat, race car set, tinkertoys, and a water pistol. The masculine activities category included things such as: karate. The feminine toys included: doll, cooking set, and tea party. The feminine activities included: ballet dancing and sewing. In addition, there was a neutral category which included items rated as equally played with by both sexes. These included such things as a puppet and roller skates. The children's form of the Personal Attributes Questionnaire contained masculine items such as liking to be best at things, liking to do things for oneself, and being a leader. Feminine traits included: being gentle, kind, and doing things for other people.

The results with regard to gender constancy are presented in Table 1 of the handout. It can be seen that our hypothesis with regard to sibling category is not supported by the data. There were no significant differences between only children and others in total gender constancy scores.

Interestingly, gender constancy scores do not correlate significantly with most of the other components of sex roles. Only one significant correlation was obtained between gender constancy and toy preferences which was relatively low and negative ($r = -.16$). This indicates that the more developed the child is with regard to gender constancy, the more traditional the preferences.

Findings relevant to the stereotyping variable are contained in Table 2 (which is on the same page as the Table 1 handout). The means in Table 2A, toys and activities, were based on a rating of 0 to 4, where zero was the perception of the opposite sex almost always playing with that toy, two was the neutral point, and 4 was the most "correct" stereotyping response. It can be seen that preschool children do distinguish between male-associated and female-associated items. At this age level boys and girls appear to be gendocentric in that they are more accurate in detecting same-sex stereotypes than cross-sex ones. Female only children are least accurate in detecting cross-sex toy stereotypes, and male only children are most accurate. Insofar as this task is not purely cognitive, however, it could be argued that the females are less sex-typed.

The results relevant to the stereotyping of personality traits are contained in the (B) portion of Table 2. There were five masculine and five feminine adjectives, and a point was given for each "correct" gender assignment. Thus, five is the maximum possible score. A similar gendocentric trend is apparent here in that girls are better at stereotyping female adjectives and boys do better with male ones. The female only children are the most accurate of the girls with regard to both male and female adjectives. The male only children are most accurate (relative to other boys) on the cross-sex ones. When toy, activity, and personality trait stereotypes are combined into a single scale, analysis of variance reveals the effects of both gender and sibling category to be significant ($F_{1,144} = 28.12$ and $F_{4,144} = 2.59$, respectively). The gender

TABLE 1

MEAN TOTAL GENDER CONSTANCY SCORES AS A FUNCTION OF FAMILY CONSTELLATION

(Maximum Score = 11)

		SIBLING CATEGORY			
SEX	ONLY CHILD (N = 53)	First-Born w/same-sex sibling (N = 27)	First-Born w/opposite-sex sibling (N = 28)	Second-Born w/same-sex sibling (N = 31)	Second-Born w/opposite-sex sibling (N = 36)
Girls	8.54	8.20	9.00	8.75	9.33
Boys	8.79	8.50	9.71	9.63	8.61

TABLE 2

MEAN RESPONSES TO SEX-ROLE STEREOTYPING QUESTIONS

A. Toys and Activities:

			Only (N=53)	First (N=55)	Second (N=67)	Same-Sex (N = 58)	Opposite-Sex (N = 64)
PRESCHOOL	Female Items	Girls	3.05	3.00	3.16	3.18	2.99
		Boys	2.82	2.47	2.63	2.49	2.58
	Male Items	Girls	2.29	2. 0	2.89	2.78	2.80
		Boys	2.90	2.81	3.12	3.00	2.87

B. Personality Traits:

			Only	First	Second	Same-Sex	Opposite-Sex
PRESCHOOL	Female Items	Girls	3.50	3.27	3.32	3.37	3.22
		Boys	2.65	1.95	2.08	2.00	2.00
	Male Items	Girls	2.58	2.48	2.36	2.35	2.49
		Boys	3.61	3.74	3.25	3.71	3.41

effect indicates that the girls are generally more accurate in stereotyping. The sibling category effect reveals that only children (of both sexes) were most accurate on the composite scale (average = 14.71), followed by those with an opposite-sex older sibling (13.58), a same-sex older sibling (13.14), an opposite-sex younger sibling (12.73), and a younger same-sex sibling (11.49). Thus, it would appear that our expectation with regard to only children's knowledge of stereotypes was supported. The findings with regard to birth order also support the confluence model. This child learns more about sex role content from an older than a younger sibling. Table 3 presents findings relevant to the flexibility hypothesis. We have looked at flexibility in three ways. The first has to do with the strength of same-sex preferences. The (A) portion of Table 3 contains the relevant means. The maximum score possible is 5. As can be seen, almost all children of this age exhibit fairly strong same-sex preferences and no significant differences were associated with either gender or sibling category.

A second way of assessing flexibility is to look at the degree to which children prefer to play with things that are either non-sex-typed or associated with the other gender. The means relevant to this are contained in the (B) portion of Table 3. As can be seen here, girls are generally more flexible in this regard than boys. Moreover, female only children are the most flexible on this measure.

A final way we have assessed flexibility is with regard to self-reported adjectives. Both gender and sibling category differences were found on the CPAQ measure. First, it should be noted that both boys and girls at this age level describe themselves with more feminine than masculine adjectives. This is interesting in view of the fact that each gender was aware of at least the same-sex stereotypes. Perhaps they see masculine attributes as more appropriate to adults. Another possibility is that the social desirability of the female items (e.g., kind) is greater at this age. With regard to sibling category, female only children describe themselves as less masculine and less feminine than any of the other groups. Thus, they appear to be the least sex-typed. Similar trends were not observed with male only children. Our expectations with regard to same-sex and opposite-sex siblings were not confirmed. Contrary to prediction, the

TABLE 3

SEX-ROLE TRADITIONALITY
AND FLEXIBILITY SCORES

A. Toys and Activities - Same-Sex Preferences: (Maximum = 5)

	Only Child	First Borns	Second Borns	Same-Sex Siblings	Opposite-Sex Siblings
	(N=53)	(N=17)	(N=53)	(N = 60)	(N = 62)
Girls	4.33	4.33	4.36	4.50	4.20
Boys	4.14	4.22	4.34	4.45	4.11

B. Toys and Activities - Non-Sex Typed and Cross-Sex Preferences: (Maximum = 9)

	Only Child	First Borns	Second Borns	Same-Sex Siblings	Opposite-Sex Siblings
Girls	7.42	6.67	6.55	6.29	6.89
Boys	5.57	5.98	5.19	5.71	5.62

C. Personality Traits (CPAQ):

		Only Child	First Borns	Second Borns	Same-Sex Siblings	Opposite-Sex Siblings
Girls	Male Adj.	6.35	7.35	7.68	6.92	8.03
	Female Adj.	7.92	8.37	8.25	8.42	8.21
Boys	Male Adj.	7.52	7.41	7.85	7.30	7.83
	Female Adj.	8.47	8.90	8.60	8.55	7.41

group of girls that described themselves as most masculine were those with a brother, although the converse was not true for boys.

To summarize, it would appear that our expectations are partially supported, particularly for females. It is clear that the presence of siblings is not an essential condition for learning the gender curriculum. It is also clear that gender itself is probably more important in determining sex role content and orientation than are family constellation variables. Family constellation was not related to acquisition of gender constancy as was predicted. Sibling status was related, however, particularly for girls, to both knowledge about cultural stereotypes and sex-role flexibility. Only children (and particularly girls) were generally more knowledgeable about various kinds of stereotypic information. Despite this, girls were less traditional in their preferences and more androgynous in their self-descriptions than were other groups. It is interesting that children of this age are able to make these rather subtle differentiations between normative expectations, on the one hand, and their own behavior on the other.

These findings raise two general questions which warrant some consideration. The first has to do with why girls are both more flexible and knowledgeable with regard to gender roles than boys. This finding brings to mind the work on racial awareness in preschool children which strongly suggests that it is the minority children who are developmentally precocious. It is tempting to draw the same analogy with regard to gender. It may be the case that groups lower in power and status have more need for knowledge about the system and also must more often fit into the higher status group's mores. Another equally tenable hypothesis (at least for the cognitive aspects), however, may be that preschool girls are more socially advanced at this age. An additional factor which may be involved is the easier and more frequent access to same-sex role models that girls have, given the greater preponderance of female caretakers and nursery school teachers. That this sex difference is not a simple cognitive phenomenon can be ruled out, however, by the absence of sex differences with regard to gender constancy scores.

A second question worth considering is why the female only children were the most extreme in terms of flexibility of gender roles. Our original thoughts about this were that both males and females who had no siblings should be more flexible because their parents would expect their only child to satisfy their unsatisfied need for a son and daughter. The fact that this was true only for girls suggests that the mechanism might not be a need for gender-role diversity as much as a need for a child who exhibits masculine traits and interests, which may be more highly valued. This is, however, but one of several possible explanations. Another possibility is that the generally greater stringency associated with the sex-typing of boys may simply permit less behavioral flexibility, irrespective of family constellation.